

Burying the shadows by OrangeLovePerson

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Summary: Set in the ending of season 2 / A bunch of different feelings have to be dealt with by a bunch of different people, and some things aren't quite over yet. Friendship, suspense and fluffiness.

1. Hopper, Steve

A.N.: Hi my unknown friends. :)

I'm going to get rid of some ideas here, and THIS IS ALL FILLED WITH SPOILERS ABOUT SEASON TWO, obviously.

I apologise for the short chapters, but not for the cheesiness. ^^

Mostly it's about how things might develop directly after the gate is closed. Tell me what you think, okay?

xx

(1)

Hopper

It had taken quite long to get her out of there, when everything was done. She wasn't unconscious, but very weak. She'd literally saved the world mere minutes ago. She'd literally closed the gap between two dimensions.

And now her limbs seemed to ache, and dry blood stuck to her earlobes and nose and upper lip. She was pale and her entire body was shaking.

"You did amazing, kid.", Hopper murmured again, feeling like he ought to say so once more.

"Thanks.", Eleven responded, voice a little dry, but contented.

She had ended it, had *purposefully* ended what she'd accidentally begun. She hadn't let her fear get the best of her, not now. Not ever again, he thought.

She was so strong, his little girl.

Because that's who she was. And it didn't matter that they'd been

fighting, and that he hadn't been good enough at this whole parenting thing with her... He would make it better.

And there would be better rules for the two of them from now on, he decided. More fitting ones. He knew that Joyce might offer to adopt her into the Byers family... Or that there could be other people able to take care of her. But he wouldn't let it come to that. No, Eleven and he were a team now, a family. Not the ideal family, perhaps, but the best both of them could possibly get.

"You okay, El?"

"Tired.", she replied, her eye lids drooping closed every few seconds. But she kept walking down the stairs, her little hand in his, and even when she was barely capable to hold herself up, she looked pretty cool in those weird new punk clothes.

"Come here", he finally demanded, and picked her up in order to carry her for the rest of the way. The last thing they needed was a completely deadbeat Eleven to fall down the entire grey stairwell of this freaking old government mansion. Hopper silently wondered what that Wheeler boy would say if he'd hear about such an accident. He'd probably attack him again. Physically, and all.

Shaking his head, Hopper contemplated when the opinions of some thirteen-year old had become important to begin with.

And then he looked down at the dizzy bundle of black-clad superhero in his arms, who was currently leaning her head against his shoulder in quite the comfortable manner. And Hopper remembered when.

(2)

Steve

The lights had become brighter for a few seconds. That's when it must have happened.

At first he'd thought that something was wrong with him: that his injuries or the weird, poisonous gasses down in the tunnels had made

his head spin.

Optical illusions, he thought, that's what this stuff is called...

But then Steve Harrington saw that the kids had turned around, too, and that everyone else was also watching the car's head lamps become these intense, star-like reverberators. And then it was silent, and everything looked quite normal in the matter of seconds. It was so silent, in fact, that no one could tell yet if it was the calm before, or after the storm. At least Steve couldn't tell.

Had they made it? Had *she* made it? That little magician kid with the eyeliner, had she just saved all of their asses?

"So,... what's going on?", he asked into the quiet, and met first Dustin's, then Mike's eyes. The former was slowly starting to beam at him, the latter looked still terribly anxious. Poor kiddo, that Mike, - it was pretty obvious to everyone how close he and that girl, Eleven, were... Even before today, he'd heard so from Nancy often enough.

Nancy.

Even if they'd survive this, he'd have to give her up after tonight, wouldn't he?

His eyes started to prick at the thought, right when Lucas, Dustin and the redhead started to hug and grin at each other, looking all hopeful. Only Mike seemed a little nervous, still.

"Seems like it worked, right?", the girl, Max, asked. "She did it?"

"Let's find out.", Lucas prompted, getting into the back of the car. Steve breathed one big mouth full of fresh night air in, before quickly opening the left front door of the car. This time he'd be the one driving, he determined.

2. Joyce, Dustin

(3)

Joyce

She held him close for a long time, her baby boy. His tired eyes were barely open: his fluttering lids moved against her shirt. His hair was sweaty, his skin pale and almost yellow. He was covered in sweat, like all of them were.

But he lived.

And he was free from all the suffering, all the ache. Finally free.

"Will, oh Will!", she whined, again and again, and what a poor little soul that was, her youngest son. To have to endured so much already, it was almost impossible to bear the thought.

"Mum, it's okay.", Will murmured, tired but happily, she believed. "I'm fine."

"Mum, I think they should be back soon.", Jonathan commented. She looked over at him, eyes proud and teary, and saw that he and Nancy Wheeler were holding hands... How lovely, she thought, curious about what that meant.

"You think so?", she asked, softly.

"It's been twenty minutes since the lights became bright... The way from here to the gate doesn't take very long."

"Okay.", Joyce Byers silently agreed, looking down at her little boy once more. "Let's get going, then. We have some people to say thank you to."

(4)

Dustin

"Mike, come on. It's alright now!", he tried to cheer his friend up, but without much success.

"We don't have any clue what happened yet, okay Dustin?", the dark-haired boy replied solemnly, and Dustin saw how he still hadn't stopped cutting the inside of his palms with his fingernails.

"Well, we didn't die in the past half hour, so that's a start.", Lucas quipped in, supported by a nodding Max, who also looked rather underwhelmed by Mike's apprehension.

Dustin understood, however.

He'd always assumed that, after Mike, he probably was the one missing Eleven the most. Sure, Lucas had come around to liking the awesome weirdo, too, in the end of their week last year, and Will was pretty curious to meet her from the start...

But when it came down to it, while none of Mike's friends were nearly grieving as much as he did, Dustin had thought about Eleven very often, too. And here she was! After an entire year!

That was frankly too incredible to end in yet another tragedy, Dustin decided.

"Did you see how great the nougat thing worked?", he muttered in Mike's direction, mostly to distract him.

"The what?"

"The thing with the chocolate! It worked! Maybe the demodogs wouldn't be dangerous at all if we'd given them lots of chocolate from the start!"

"Would you stop calling them demodogs?", Steve deadpanned from the driver's seat, and looked at Dustin through the mirror. He just shrugged.

"Just saying. He may have eaten my cat, but he also chose to eat nougat when he could have eaten *us*. That's kind of heart-warming."

"Oh, yes, I can already feel my heart warm up, what an amazing creature such a monster dog is.", Max commented in disinterest.

"Demodog!", Dustin exclaimed, half-annoyed at her sarcasm.

"Alright, whatever."

"Guys, I already lost my cat and my demodog recently. Can you at least let me name the species? I'm basically who discovered them, anyway!"

"You're also the genius who let that demodog close to your cat in the first place, you know.", Lucas grinned.

"Thank you for calling them demodogs.", Dustin replied, pleased with this outcome.

Sigh. "You're welcome."

3. Barb, Bob, Terry

(5)

Barb

Had Barbara Holland seen Nancy Wheeler the way she was nowadays, she'd probably been proud of her best friend.

Not just because of Nancy's lovely new hair cut – *Barb had told her often enough to be a bit more adventurous with these things, and she'd been right, hadn't she? Nancy really was such a pretty girl...*

Or because of Nancy's impressive fighting skills. She'd toughened up quite a bit ever since her first encounters with the upside-down, and Barb would have been so amazed at seeing her friend like that... *Gun in hand, determination spreading through her entire body, monster traps and Christmas lights placed around her, or spy equipment hidden in her purse.*

No, but Barbara would have been proud of Nancy for her choices, too.

Her choice to not look away, to not pretend that things were fine when they really weren't...

Nancy had gotten tired of the happy falsehood in her life. And even though that might have hurt Steve Harrington, - a boy Barb would have liked quite a lot better, these days, than she originally did,- it was important that Barb's parents knew the truth.

They had to.

They couldn't sell their house, give up their dreams and entire lives just for the sake of finding her, when they never would. It was better for them to be grieving than to be madly illusionary. Barb had always been a realist.

And if Nancy had only listened to her friend, all these nights ago...

If she'd only tried to be less abrupt in her choice to spend the night at Steve's... A boy she'd hardly trusted, at that point, and merely had a crush on. Barb had said that Nancy should be a bit more careful with those decisions. Nancy hadn't really been herself around that time, according to Barb.

But teenage girls hardly ever were themselves, when boys were involved, and maybe it's wrong to assume that their characters could be carved in stone and one-sided, to begin with.

Barb wouldn't have been angry at Nancy for leaving her alone that night. Wouldn't have blamed Nancy for her death. Not then, not ever.

It wasn't Nancy's fault that her best friend got involved in all of this. It wasn't her place to feel guilty. And yet, she'd guiltily solved Barb's postmortal problem, and told everyone the truth.

Well, a form of the truth.

Barb would have liked the speech given on her funeral. She'd have liked the music, too. And the colors of the flowers.

And mostly, she'd have liked seeing her best friend a bit more at peace, a bit less tortured by the past.

A bit less misunderstood, next to that Byers-boy. Jonathan. Was he a good friend to her? Barb would have hoped so. Barb would have loved to see Nancy not only with a nice boyfriend, but also with someone who could be her best friend in a way, as well...

Nancy needed someone to talk to, she needed someone friendly and clever and kind. And she needed to learn to forgive herself.

Barbara Holland would have hugged Nancy really tightly, if she'd met her again today. But she couldn't, for she was long gone.

Gone, gone, gone.

But it's frankly true that she would have hugged her, and she also would have been proud.

(6)

Bob

Bob Newby had been an underdog all of his life.

No, really!

He'd been a nerdy, shy kid without many friends and even less athletic qualities. He'd been liked by his teachers and loved by his parents, and even by his neighbours. But he'd been pushed around in high school and college, and he'd been chubby and not really equipped with the greatest self-esteem.

His optimism, however, had always been one of his best features. His good heart. His fondness and utter fascination for technology, and all that. He was a smart guy, that was obvious.

So, eventually, the dorky man was rewarded for all these qualities, and it really had felt amazing.

Joyce Byers, the lovely, beautiful *Joyce Byers*, had been going on dates with him. And she'd truly seemed to enjoy his company! She'd been smiling, whenever they met, and invited him into her home, and her two sons were wonderful boys who he really felt a form of connection to, a form of understanding... Bob had longed to be a part of this sweet family, of this new life. And he'd been, for a while. In a really nice way.

But, ultimately, he was an underdog.

And underdogs weren't meant to save the entire world, and to walk out of the fights unharmed. Were they?

If this was an episode of *Star Trek*, he'd be the crew member with the red shirt,- the one that no one knew the name of, Bob realised at one point.

He'd be the one who'd made it into *Starfleet academy* all these years ago, and who had survived some other, past adventures already. And who also had successfully completed all these tests and risked so

much, - all set in episodes that never existed and were never seen. Because no one on *Star Trek* focuses their attention on those people's stories, on their backgrounds, their accomplishments. They're just those supernumeraries with the red shirts, who have to die to show to the audience how dangerous things are, out here in space.

But they'd known what they were getting themselves into, hadn't they? They'd wanted this – wanted to see the most incredible sides of our universe first hand, no matter the risk. And sometimes, - in *some* episodes of *Star Trek*, - there actually *had* been people paying attention to the red-shirt-guys, hadn't there?

As Bob had been laying on the floor in the ministry, getting lacerated by monsters, he'd pondered this topic.

And yes.

There had been some episodes, - he was quite certain now that there were,- where the dying underdogs received a few tears, a few screams or reactions of despair. Just like he'd seen from Joyce, earlier, when he'd first been hit by the weight of the brutal creature.

And it was horrible to leave her behind, her and her little family, but the panic and complete despair Bob had felt earlier was then replaced by an unexpected sense of peace, of self-respect. What he'd said to Joyce, earlier, had been true. He was a superhero, in a way. Not all superheroes were remembered on big screens and in flashy, intergenerational comics, but some of them were frankly red-clad *Starfleet* members. Quietly loved and mostly fameless, but accomplished, nonetheless.

And to have been dating Joyce Byers was quite the accomplishment, right?

Yes, Bob Newby truly died as a superhero.

(7)

Terry

Terry can feel her out there, her little Jane. She always could.

You wouldn't think that she can. Not with the way that she's mumbling and barely moving and probably looking like the poor maniac people believe her to be, but Terry isn't entirely gone.

A mother *can't* enjoy the luxury of complete insanity, when her kid is still somewhere out there, lost and confused and maybe, possibly, one day in serious need of help. Of some sort of guidance.

So Terry's been holding on, no matter how hard it was... A small part of her mind is still intact, and all for the sake of her little wonder.

She used to call her that when she was pregnant... She could feel that something was odd about Jane even then.

One time she'd woken up at night, Terry used to remember, and it had been quite hot in her room. Too hot. It was summer, and the dark wood of Terry's bedroom had somehow trapped the heat in there with her even more, and as Terry woke up the bedsheets were *flying* above her in mid-air, half a metre away from her body. She hadn't been imagining that. She couldn't have.

And then there was that one time where the music had changed... Terry would listen to the radio in her car, and just like that it kept switching the stations a couple times... It was so spooky. It had truly felt like there was some sort of mighty presence surrounding Terry... But she somehow knew that it wasn't a bad thing. It was as if her baby could feel frequencies, or something. It was just like the flickering lights, recently, and like the TV when it got so blurry and rustling for no apparent reason... It felt as if Jane was more special than Terry had ever expected.

Even then... Even when Jane was merely a concept, she'd been special. She'd never even seen her mother's face, never seen the sun or feel someone's arms around her, and yet she could switch of *music* she didn't like.

Terry obviously couldn't tell anyone about these suspicions. She had to be careful enough as it was. She knew that she was being watched. Brenner was watching her.

If Jane hadn't been special, it might have been easier. Maybe the crazy government employees tested her, somehow, right after she was born? Maybe, if Jane hadn't been so special, Brenner would have somehow found out right after the baby's birth, and just given her back. Without making up an insane natal death story.

Terry wasn't even sure of *that*. Brenner was evil. He might have just killed Jane, if she'd not had those powers. Just to destroy Terry, in pure cruelty.

But as it was, Jane was an amazing, special creature. And when those people realised it, they took her away. And then, years later, they'd also taken her mother's sanity. Mostly.

But Terry had known that she would someday return, and now Terry knew so, once again. Jane had seen her. Jane knew about her. She would come back, maybe in search of more answers.

Terry wondered how much stronger she could be. If she could finally manage to conserve and regain even more of her mind back, for Jane. Terry had seen Jane's face, Jane's hair. She reminded Terry of her sister, Becky, in a way. How beautiful that was. Terry loved her sister so much, her sister who had cared for her over the cause of many years, just like that. If Jane could become a little bit like Terry's sister, she'd be glad.

Come back to me, quickly, she thought, in a corner of her mind that hadn't quite learned yet to be outspoken again, but that was there, anyway. *Let me see you again, Jane.*

4. Kali, Max

(8)

008

In the matter of less than 60 hours, she'd found her lost little sister, and already lost her again. And she'd found out quite how shitty that was.

It sucked. This entire situation was complete shit.

She wasn't often overly sentimental, and yet the others were staring at her like she was nuts. Because they'd been on the road for nearly four hours now, and she still couldn't stop crying.

She'd barely been able to help them with her powers in order to get rid of the cops, way too distracted and upset and... And under different circumstances, what she'd come up with probably wouldn't have been enough. But yeah, now they were free again, roaming the area for a new idea where to hide, for now, and also for lack of a better thing to do.

Alex looked at her again.

"Damn it, Kali. I know it's hard, but..."

"Just shut up."

It was quiet again. That's how things had been ever since *Jane left them*, these four hours ago... Kali would look like a wreck and the others would notice and made remarks and she'd tell them to shut up. The end.

But she'd lost her little sister, alright? Wasn't she entitled to feel a bit traumatised?

"It's going to be okay.", someone said, and Kali didn't look or even try to notice who it had been. Probably Mick. Unusually nice lately.

But that obviously was wrong. Nothing would be okay, at least not all too soon. Kali hadn't known how deep that scar ran, that feeling of incompleteness... But when Jane had arrived, bringing with her the healing, the missing puzzle piece, only to disappear again and rip it out of the puzzle once more...

Kali had started bleeding.

A part of Kali was alright with it. Was alright with knowing that she had a sister out there, and that "Shirley Temple" was amazing, and that she might see her again some day.

Another part was furious, and Kali had a habit of being quite resentful in such cases...

How dared Jane? How could she come here and look so lost and sad and in search of her, when really she had friends elsewhere that she felt oh-so-committed to? If other people needed her saving, then what was about Kali? What was about the saving of all those people they wanted to protect from their enemies?

Did Jane really think that bad people just stopped being bad, at one point? Did she think that problems disappeared from looking away? Was she such a coward, to only act when in direct danger *herself*?

"Don't be unfair, Kali.", Mick murmured.

"What?", she asked, confused.

"I see your eyes. You're angry at her, you think she's some kind of crappy person just 'cause she didn't fit in right away. Don't do that to yourself."

Kali could feel the vein above her left eyebrow. It knocked softly and painfully against the inside of her forehead.

"I never said she's crappy, or whatever. Just give it a rest, guys."

She only wanted to sleep, really. Not think about what the others thought or what she, herself, thought, or what Jane was doing, right now. What danger Jane was saving her friends from, or whether she'd get in trouble along the way...

For now, it didn't matter, anyway.

And tomorrow, Kali's pain would be less intense, wouldn't it?

(9)

Max

It's funny how powerful pain can be. It can be like... well, like a magic button, in some situations.

Mostly a bad one. Like, the sort of button that should have a bright red DO NOT PRESS sign attached to it. But now, for once, pain was a great thing. For once in Max' life, she could use the button in *someone else's* head.

Normally, her stepbrother would hurt her or scare her or insult her, and that would make her entire character change. The face she wore in school, - the tough, confident one, stopped existing. All that she had left was that look of *"I'll do whatever you want, just stop, please!"*. That look of *"You win and I lose."*

This time, she'd defeated the great big jerk. She'd hurt him and she'd liked it. And he wouldn't come near her again like that very soon, she just knew. What had been his problem with Lucas, anyway?

Why was it always in the most disgusting ways that Billy expressed some sort of brotherly feelings for her? If you could call it that. Which you probably couldn't. He didn't act like a jerk because he was her stepbrother, nope, he acted like a jerk whenever he found excuses for releasing his jerk-ness.

And Lucas was... well, there was no sort of harm in Lucas. At all. He was just this sweet, understanding guy, who...-

No. She definitely couldn't think about stuff like that *while sitting next to Lucas*. She'd embarrass herself somehow, or worse. And better not think about what that 'worse' could exactly mean, either, Max! Not a good idea.

"Everything okay?", Lucas asked, looking slightly nervous, for some reason. They had just arrived at the Byers' place, sitting next to each other on the stairs outside now, and quietly awaited everyone's returning... Mike was pacing again, for whatever reason. They could hear his steps echo on the wooden floor of the living room. And Dustin and Steve had disappeared inside, too.

"Sure, why?", Max asked, coolly. She actually felt quite calm, considering all the events of the night.

"Oh, you just.. You just looked like you were thinking really hard about something, I don't know.", Lucas quietly laughed, looking nervous again. Was he seriously nervous just from sitting here with her? Geez.

How awkwardly reassuring that was.

"I'm..-", she began, taking a breath, "I'm just glad that you told me about all of this, Lucas. I, - I know that wasn't easy."

He looked surprised and also quite pleased, and had Lucas just gotten an inch closer to her?

"Oh. Oh, yeah, sure, I mean... You deserved to know. You shouldn't feel left out all the time."

She blinked down at his hand on the staircase, amazed by how close she actually was to grasping it. But then she didn't, she rather just smiled at him for now.

"Hey Lucas, can I... Can I ask you something? About Eleven?"

He looked surprised. Rubbing his neck distractedly, he said: "Er, sure. What do you want to know?"

"Well, when she tried to get into your group last year, did Mike give her such a hard time, too?"

Lucas raised his eyebrows. "Huh?"

"I mean, did Mike also react all grumpy at first? And did you also help Eleven, like you helped me?"

Lucas chuckled. "Oh god, no. The other way around, actually. I really wasn't El's biggest fan in the beginning, to be honest! We even had this big fight at one point..-"

"What, you and El?!"

"And Mike, yeah. More me and Mike than me and El, but, well, the whole thing was about her, you know?"

I thought she was just distracting us from finding Will, but I was wrong of course. Without her, we'd never gotten him back safely."

"So, in your fight, Mike defended El?"

"Uh-huh. He was pretty crazy about her from the beginning.", Lucas laughed, grinning a bit smugly at her and then quickly looking backwards at the front door. Probably making sure Mike wasn't standing there and listening, Max thought with a smirk.

"He wanted her to be part of the team pretty much from the start, and, well, I didn't. So that caused some trouble... But later on, I realised how awesome she was, and that we really are lucky. To have ever met her at all, you know?"

"Seems like it.", Max quietly nodded, pondering.

"Look, Mike was just... Mike was really in a bad mood this past year, and El can be a bit... weird ... at first, but I'm sure they'll come around. They'll also want you in our group, I mean."

"You really think so?", she asked, trying to sound not too hopeful or eager, but already smiling widely.

"Yeah, of course!", Lucas replied, a huge beam on his face, too. He really was sweet.

In that instant, they saw a car approach, the bright light causing them to shut their eyes for a second. "Who's that?", Max wondered out loud, not able to see the driver and passengers yet. "Will and the others? Or El and Hopper?"

"It's Will.", someone said, behind them, and when Max turned around

she saw that Mike was staring at the approaching car silently. He somehow managed to look both happy and frustrated at the sight.

"She's going to be back soon.", she offered, quietly, still hoping to get on his good side. So far, Max found that talking fondly about Eleven had seemed to lessen Mike's annoyance against herself, slightly.

Without saying anything to that, Mike had slipped through the Byers' door again, and back was the sound of the pacing. Lucas just shrugged, smiling, and Max fought the impulse to take his hand in hers once more.

5. Mike

(10)

Mike

Mike could still feel the supernatural dirt from the tunnels all over his clothes, as he strolled around the Byers' living room. It was warm in here, in a good way, for the air outside was pretty chilly. Cold November nights seemed to be meant for saving the world-stuff, at least here in Hawkins.

He breathed a couple hundred times in and out, in and out... kicked his feet nervously against the furniture... felt bad for kicking other people's furniture, then, and shovelled the couch cushions around instead. And he paced, and he shut his eyes tight, opened them again, shut them again. And he still felt terribly uneasy.

Why weren't they back yet? What was going on?

A part of Mike's overloaded brain kept skipping back to the instant the lights had changed... The car lights, and apparently the lights where Will and the others were, too... Nancy had mentioned it earlier, with the radio equipment. (Hopper and El hadn't called again, yet...)

Why did the lights get brighter, for a moment? Was it because the gate was closed? Had that been the moment when she'd done it? Or did something else happen, causing the lights to glow so brightly? What if El... *what if El had died?*

Mike could feel his stomach twitch and his eyes burn. He might actually throw up if they didn't come back soon. It was just this crazy imagination of his, making him wonder if El's energy... her, ..her whole magic, or whatever you wanted to call it, could have leaked out of her, somehow. Due to her getting hurt, or something.

And that was obviously crazy. The others had basically started to party, after they saw it happening. The head lamps had become

brighter, no one had assumed anything bad, they were certain that El had closed the gate and was safely on her way back. Which made sense to think, considering that they hadn't come across any more demodogs and that Will was himself again, too. Of course it hadn't meant anything bad! She was amazing, and she had closed the gate. Of course she had.

But what about afterwards? Even if she did everything right (which she must have, she was incredible), what then? She must be a complete wreck after using so much strength for this. Maybe she collapsed right afterwards! And there was only Hopper, and yes, Hopper was pretty strong and badass and everything, but could he possibly protect her in case the bad men were back? Or some other villain? They were in the middle of this really dangerous building,- the building where El had fled from, a year ago,- and what if someone wanted to keep her there, or to harm her in some way?

And even if all that wasn't the case, how must it make her feel to be in there again? Was she scared?

A year ago, she'd basically sacrificed herself already, for all of this shit! And she didn't deserve any of this. She shouldn't have had to hide, either, for a whole year after. She deserved a normal life, a family, all the eggos in the world. Literally all of them.

Instead she was once again fighting for her friends. Could you believe this?

If something should have happened to her tonight, - anything – Mike was going to get seriously pissed at Hopper once more. He knew he would. They all could have gone together to the gate, couldn't they? But no, once again *the adults* were in charge. At least Steve had been cool enough to go along with their earlier plans, and had helped them to distract the mind flayer. At least that way Mike hadn't felt quite as useless.

But to keep El away from him for an entire year... How was Mike supposed to get over that? How was he supposed to be alright with the chief's decision?

He'd suffered so much, this past year. An entire year had felt like

actual torture for Mike.

Mike hadn't given up on her, not really. But just as often as he'd been convinced that she lived, he'd been convinced that he had lost his mind. The trembling uncertainty had been digging into his skull, into his heart, for months and months.

It ran awfully deep, his loss of Eleven. Sure, it was everyone's loss. But then again it was his and his loss alone. Because she had belonged to him in a way that wasn't quite the same with the rest of their group. And Hopper, who had barely known her for a day had felt entitled to make her stay away from her new friends, her protectors? That was just... bullshit.

If Hopper seriously thought that Mike gave a damn about the "risk", he'd clearly gotten everything wrong. Entirely wrong.

What, just because Mike and his friends were kids, they couldn't see how important it was to keep El's existence a secret? Just because they weren't wearing some fancy police uniforms they couldn't tell that she had to stay hidden?

It wouldn't even have to be *all* of them, Mike quietly told himself. If he, only he, would have known about El being alive somewhere,- safe somewhere,- so many things would have been so much better.

He knew that that was a selfish thing to think. Dustin and Lucas and Will cared about El, too. And Will's Mum. Those people would surely have managed to keep their mouths shut, had Hopper mentioned anything to them. But, alright, if Hopper seriously didn't trust them, couldn't he at least have trusted Mike? Dustin and Lucas and even *Nancy* had immediately noticed that he... cared for El. Like,...- A lot. He cared for her so much that he'd cried more this past year than probably ever before in his life. Combined.

So why had Hopper, the great big city-cop, not picked up on that fact last year? And seen that Mike was supposed to know about El's surviving?

Just one sentence would have been enough. He wouldn't even have needed to see her, as long as she was okay. That would have made all

the difference, all the change.

He'd still crave to see her, obviously. Every day he would.

But Mike had his priorities, alright? And Hopper should have known.

And then that thing he'd said. *"Don't blame her, she's upset enough as it is..."*

What the hell?!

How would any logical thinking person possibly blame *El* for Hopper's crimes? He'd probably told her the same sort of bullshit that he was now using as an excuse in front of Mike. *"It wasn't safe. I was only protecting her and you."*

Protecting her?! Protecting Eleven *from Mike*?!

It was by far the most insulting thing anyone had ever said to Mike. Ever.

And maybe there was a small part of Mike that had already processed all of this, and that might be able to forgive Hopper, in a way... That same part that had been calm enough to stand there and talk to Hopper like a normal person, earlier. Or even hug him, in the middle of that crazy emotional outburst he'd had...

But mostly, Mike still wasn't sure if he'd be okay with Hopper's choice.

Mike ran outside when the car lamps shot through the window, only to notice that it was Mrs Byers with Will, Jonathan and Nancy. They all looked quite happy when they left the car, and Mrs Byers hurried to make Will some tea and a few snacks- she feared that he might get sick from all the trauma his body had suffered from recently, and couldn't possibly calm down until she had done *something*.

Dustin had already swallowed most of his toasted cheese sandwich, when he'd mentioned: "Oh, by the way, Mike, Hopper just called. They made it out of there and are on their way back."

"What?!", Mike said, a little breathless.

"Yes, we heard it too.", Mrs Byers noted, smiling fondly. "She really did it, she closed the gate. It's finally over."

"And is she..-?"

"-Yes, she's okay. God, Mike, you need to calm down, look how pale you are!", Nancy quipped in, smirking.

"You should have heard him in the car!", Lucas laughed. *"Is this really the quickest way guys? We really need to hurry here!"*, he mimicked his friend, using a way too high-pitched voice.

"Why where you guys in the car?", Nancy asked, confused. "I thought we all agreed that you kids wait here?" She started to give Steve a pretty accusative glance, before perhaps realising that she felt uncomfortable, looking at him at all. They'd broken up, it seemed?

"Yeah, well, about that..." Dustin started, but Mike decided that he wasn't really feeling bad about what they'd done.

"We went into the tunnels, distracting the demodogs."

"You did what?", Nancy exclaimed, looking pissed and slightly worried.

"I made them come, and together we made Steve come, too. It's not his fault, he was mostly unconscious and then doing a really great job. We wanted to set a blaze and get the dogs away from the gate, for Eleven, and it looks like it worked. At least at first it did. So, you can get grumpy all you want, Nancy, but it was still totally worth it."

"Totally.", Dustin added, and Lucas and Max nodded in agreement.

"Why were you unconscious?", Jonathan asked Steve, curious, but Steve only shrugged.

"It might have something to do with how his entire face looks like a bloody steak right now. Only a guess.", Max quipped in, smiling. Lucas snickered.

At that point, they heard another car roll towards the Byers house.

Eleven, Mike thought, feeling his heart beat quicken at the word.
Eleven, Eleven, Eleven.

He hoped he hadn't said her name out loud, but also couldn't really bring himself to care, right now.

Eleven.

6. Eleven, Nancy

(11)

011

El found it important to be good.

Good was being nice to girls who needed to get somewhere, if you happened to have a big truck. Good was letting El live in your grandfather's old cabin, and making it all nice and cozy in there. Good was promising to watch Horror movies with her, and even if you forgot about it and broke the promise, it was good to apologise by making eggos.

Mike was the most good person El could think of, and he also was the most angry when he found out where she'd been for the last 353 days.

Which was good, too. It was good that Mike cared. So had El.

She shouldn't have yelled at her policeman so much, before. And she shouldn't have broken all the rules on purpose. And the windows. That was bad. She had been stupid, but at least they had been stupid together.

It wasn't always easy to know what kind of stuff good people do or don't do. Only the bad men had been there for most of her life, and they had been such mouthbreathers. But El found it really important to try to be good. The difference between people like Mike and people like Papa was so awfully big. She just *had* to find the good stuff in herself. Like... the eggos in herself, in her brain, not the mushy peas. But that wasn't really a clever thing to say, - Peas were good for your brain, after all, and so were other vegetables. It was better for you than candy and eggos, her policeman had told El. But that was hard to believe. Eggos were so much yummier than peas. She still ate the peas, mostly, it made him happy when she did.

El wanted to be a good friend, and while helping her friends fight the

shadow monster *had* been good, not answering Mike for all these days had felt like *agony*.

She'd learned that word a while ago. *Agony*. It had been the word of day 300, she remembered. *Agony* was when you felt really, really bad.

She didn't feel really bad, right now. No agony at all.

She just missed Mike, she always did. But now it felt different, now it felt good to miss Mike. He'd be there again, in a few minutes. And minutes weren't really long.

"You look exhausted, kiddo. Maybe we should just call it a night and drive back to the cabin.", Hopper murmured, next to her. He looked exhausted too, El found.

She shook her head. "We didn't say goodnight."

"And?"

"It's nice to say goodnight."

"Ah-ha. Well, we better be nice and do that in person then, shall we?"

His mouth shifted around in his face. Her policeman had a very nice smile sometimes.

She couldn't see anything at first, it was so dark outside.

But then El could, and she saw Mike from afar. He stood right in the front of Will's house, like he hadn't moved at all since when they had left. But now he looked happy. El felt happy, too. She had done good, Hopper had said. She felt like he was right. And Mike might say so, too. Maybe, Mike felt home, as well. Eleven felt so home right now that she almost couldn't believe it. When had things last felt so good?

Probably right after she'd learned how to say "pudding".

Nancy

Nancy watched her younger brother approach El for the second time that night, and she couldn't help but to be dazzled at how willingly he let his affection for her show. Like, he seriously didn't care. At all. He didn't care who might be watching them or if anyone else wanted to talk to El, too... He just made clear that El was *his*, right now. Maybe always. Holy cricket.

It was scary and awkward and incredibly sweet to watch her little brother be so utterly focused on this girl. And Nancy had known, obviously. She wasn't blind. Her parents might be, in a way, but she wasn't. Even after finding out about Mike's friendship with "the dangerous girl" they'd been warned about by their *beloved* government last November, Ted and Karen Wheeler hadn't drawn the right conclusions. But Nancy knew that Mike's mood swings had been the result of something more than some rebel-puberty-hormones and general frustration. He'd been deeply, resoundingly depressed. He'd been a complete wreck. But then again, so had she, hadn't she?

Maybe it was a bit different. Mike couldn't possibly have felt *guilty* about El's "death", right? Not the way Nancy had felt because of Barb's death?

But maybe he had felt just as... helpless as Nancy had. No one had really cared enough about Barb's vanishing. At least her teachers and classmates didn't really... And El hadn't received enough grief either.

She'd saved the world tonight, hadn't she? Or at least a whole bunch of people. Certainly Hawkins. Definitely all of her friends.

El looked completely tired, and Mike had been so anxious for hours... It was funny to watch really, how the energy seemed to shift as soon as they saw each other. Nancy sat there in the window seat, and as Dustin and Lucas approached her from behind, they all quietly laughed at the whole picture. Mike's shoulders visibly melted downwards, his back relaxing, his straightened, shaking limbs suddenly looking calm. And even from this angle Nancy could see a hint of that awed, wild beam that was probably spreading across his features right now. And El, who's entire face was smeared with blood

and dirt and exhaustion, returned the smile so brightly that Nancy heard Mrs Byers lightly chuckle at the sight, probably also watching them, through the kitchen window.

"Look at that.", the petite woman sighed, and Nancy quietly wondered how her own Mum might have reacted at the picture. Karen Wheeler wasn't a bad mother, really, but Nancy remembered how misunderstood she'd felt while going out with Steve, for a while... Her Mum had been so... annoyingly strict about it, at first. And the more secrets Nancy had kept, the worse it got.

How would their Mum react about *Mike's* first love?

Maybe worse. He'd been her baby boy for so long, after all. On the other hand, there was Holly, now, and Mike hadn't been very much of a sweet little kid any longer for the past (what was it?)... *353 days*, anyway. He'd gotten himself into quite a lot of trouble, actually.

So, maybe Mike would become a little easier again, now that Eleven was back? Would people notice that change in his character? Were they aloud to talk about El, or was she still a secret?

Nancy shook her head. It was un-freaking-believable that Hopper-who'd been such a respectable authority in her eyes, for the past year- had been hiding something so important from all of them. Nancy couldn't help but to feel angry. Hopper might have had good intentions, but Mike had been incredibly upset for so many months, it was hard for Nancy to forgive that so quickly. He was her brother, after all. And El... El was special. She was brave and kind and surely very troubled, as it was, right? She had been hidden in a laboratory for most of her life! She could barely speak! What a poor kid. And then to be kept away for so long from her friends, too...

Nancy watched through the window how Hopper murmured something in El's direction as he stepped out of the car, before walking past her and up the stairs to the Byers' front door. When it opened, he approached Mrs Byers, who wrapped her arms around him like an old friend. Well, according to Jonathan, that's what she was to Hopper.

"How did it go? Did she...?-"

"Of course she did.", the tall man muttered calmly, though not without pride in his voice. Joyce must have heard it, too.

"Did you adopt her, Jim? Was she really living with you for an entire year? In that cabin?"

He looked down, perhaps more shy upon hearing the last part than the rest of it, "Yeah, well look, I know it's not the best environment for a kid, that old thing, but..."

"That's not what I meant.", Joyce hurried to say, looking apologetic. "Not at all, you did an amazing job, it seemed very nice in there to me!"

"Yeah?"

"Of course!", Joyce smiled, reassuringly. She turned around and prepared a mug of tea for Hopper, pressing it into his outstretched hand a second later.

"Did she...er... Was there any furniture lying around? On the floor?", he asked, weirdly nonchalant.

"Furniture?", Mrs Byers raised her brows at the question.

"Nevermind.", the cop replied, gulping down the tea that must have still been way too hot for him to drink. Well, if it was, he covered that fact well. "We should go in a minute. I only came back to let her have her moment with the Wheeler boy, but seriously, she needs to rest."

Joyce nodded, staring through the window again for a second. "It's good that you kept her safe, Jopper.", she quietly commented. "She's such a strong girl, but she needs someone to look after her, too. A real home."

"Well, she has one.", he said, in a voice that once again confused Nancy. He sounded proud and yet... so final. Like he was scared someone might take over, might give Eleven a home somewhere else than in Hopper's cabin. A parent that wasn't him... Was that what it was, that had led the chief to keep El hidden for so long? Not just the fear of something happening to her, but also his fear of something

happening to *them*? The two of them?

Weird, really, to see such a tough man get all dependant on an almost mute little girl. Then again, Hopper had probably been lonely for a long time.

He gave a quick nod towards her and Mike's friends, looking honestly respectful in the act. Then, Nancy glanced out of the window, where Mike and El,- who sat side by side on the steps out there and were close, but not quite touching,- turned around at the sound of the opening door.

"Time to go kiddo.", Hopper resolved, and something in Mike's expression darkened for a second, his blakish brown eyes almost glaring at the man for the fraction of an instant. But then he looked at El again, whose own features where tired and scared and happy and sad and *loving*, all at once, and maybe Mike had decided that she really needed to sleep, in that moment. He suddenly smiled and got up, reaching out to help her up with his right hand.

Nancy quietly laughed at Hopper's obvious uncomfortableness, as the two young teenagers hugged once more... But then it was over, and then Eleven sat next to her stoic guardian in the passenger's seat of the car. And Mike stood there and looked utterly lost as the motor yet again started howling, taking Eleven away once more.

And maybe it was time for Nancy to bring her little brother home, too.